

Marie Anne Mayeski. *Women at the Table: Three Medieval Theologians*. Liturgical Press, 2004.  
pp. xi + 159.

**W**omen always have been included in the theological dialogues of the Church, shaping and forming doctrine by their example, their teachings, and the adroit use of their power. Marie Anne Mayeski, a professor of historical theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, leaves little doubt regarding the validity of this assertion. Her analysis crosses paths with and builds upon previous work in feminist studies, Church history, theology, and philosophy to reveal the extent to which women have been instrumental in shaping theology.

Mayeski proves her point by analyzing three hagiographic works. She argues that while hagiographies have been successfully employed to gain a glimpse into the social and economic life of the less documented elements of society, their value has been underestimated in the study of theology. However, as the medieval authors themselves

clearly considered these writings to be doctrinal in orientation and purpose, perhaps modern theologians should consider them in a similar light.

In selecting specific case studies, Mayeski chose texts that (1) were written nearly contemporaneously with the life of the saint, giving added weight to their historicity, (2) reflect theological changes affecting the Church at the time, and (3) were not only written about women but were created by women as author, subject, and/or patron.

The first text to be considered is chronologically the last. *The Life of St. Margaret of Scotland* was written at the very beginning of the twelfth-century by her chaplain, Turgot, at the request of her daughter, Matilda, the wife of Henry I of England. This hagiography explores the theological question of inherited virtue, a result of which is the salvific quality of childbearing. During the reign of Henry

I, issues of inheritance took on special significance, in large part because of Henry's reintegration of the bloodline of the House of Wessex into the English royal family through his marriage to Matilda whose mother Margaret had been one of the last of that royal stock. Turgot's treatment of Margaret's life also explores the theological implications of inheritance. Ælred of Rievaulx, building upon Turgot, argues that virtue is inherited from one's ancestors, a notion which was supported by contemporary, particularly Cistercian, theology. Anselm of Canterbury furthered the notion of inherited virtue by separating the concept of original sin from the act of procreation. Thus, as Mayeski concludes, "if one's historic ancestors can endow one with the capacity for specific virtues and if the human nature one is given at birth is intrinsically good and has a god-given inclination for responding to God's grace, then human procreation and childbirth are, potentially at least, instrumental causes in the work of salvation" (40).

Mayeski then leaves the theological debate of the twelfth-century and turns her attention to the evangelical activities of St. Leoba, the eighth-century nun who partnered with St. Boniface in his missionary efforts amongst the German tribes. Her *Life* was written by Rudolf of Saxony, a monk at the Abbey of Fulda, based on interviews with nuns who had known and worked with Leoba. Rudolf relates how St. Leoba represented the Church and its teachings in an official capacity as an advisor to Charlemagne and his wife Hildegard. She demonstrated the balance between holiness and humanity through her virtue, and was herself evidence of the inclusive nature of the Church, which embraces all ethnicities, social classes, and gender. Finally, she fulfilled the evangelical mission of the Church through her ministry as teacher. Through Leoba, Rudolf presents an ecclesiology that defines the Church as "one, catholic, and apostolic," but also—and perhaps primarily—"holy" (98). Leoba was a full partner and participant in the theological discussion at the table.



In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, a nun by the name of Baudonivia wrote a life of St. Radegunde, a Thuringian princess who had married her family's murderer Clothar, king of the Franks, before fleeing from him for the safety and seclusion of her monastery at Poitiers. Several lives have been written about this remarkable early Christian saint, but Mayeski selected Baudonivia's version for the unique perspective she provides as both a woman and a close personal acquaintance of Radegunde. The text explores the use of power, or rather its inversion. By renouncing her temporal authority as queen, Radegunde establishes her holiness and achieves power. She then brings this power to bear on the secular world by acting as mediator between contentious kings, protector of her country, and nurturer of her community of women. While other scholars have observed that the nature of the holy works of female saints tended to be confined to the domestic sphere, Mayeski argues that Baudonivia characterizes Radegunde's service as discipleship, reflecting a Marcan interpretation of the theology

of the cross, which emphasizes service to others. Radegunde is portrayed as neither the victim of power nor the domestication of female power, but a fully expressed theology of power that calls for service to others.

Here we come to the meaning of the title of the book. *Women at the Table* does not refer to women acting in any domestic fashion to serve or set the table. Rather, it is a reference to the Greek word, *diakonein*, which means "waiting at the table," and came in the Christian tradition to imply service and sacrifice as exemplified by Christ at the Last Supper, when he waited and served and sacrificed himself at the table. Mayeski's play on words, with all their attendant meanings, neatly encapsulates her argument that women have always been at the table of Christian theology, not as attendants or handmaidens, but as full participants in the discussion. Their inclusion altered and influenced the tenor of the debate: childbirth became a means of salvation rather than a curse, the Church became inclusive in its ministry rather

than selective, and the exercise of power meant sacrificing rather than imposing one's will in order to benefit those in need.

Mayeski's cogent arguments would have been strengthened by a concluding chapter that tied together the individual case studies. It is worth considering the doctrinal truths that each saint and her biographer might have gleaned from previous texts, and how these were reflected in subsequent hagiographies. Perhaps the recognition of a potential theological lineage is what motivated Mayeski to present her case studies in reverse chronological order, tracing the thread of such theological discussions back from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. A final chapter discussing the interaction of these theological treatises would have been helpful, underscoring perfectly the contribution of women to the study of theology by illustrating the process of imparting doctrinal wisdom and theological teachings from one generation to the next.

Mayeski notes in her preface that the "Christian tradition is an organic reality whose developments are always in response to the external stimuli of new contexts, new pastoral needs, and new cultural values" (viii). This book has provided the new stimuli which in conjunction with today's pastoral needs and cultural values might encourage the Church to consider the contributions of women to questions of doctrine and theology in a different light. Women always have been at the table; perhaps they should be included in the discussion—again.

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